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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 001348

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PHUM BO
SUBJECT: FREEDMON TO TRAVEL FREELY IN THEORY ONLY

¶1. Summary: In the past month, the GOB has taken a series of steps - including detentions at airports and borders, seizures at customs, travel bans, and refusals to issue exit travel permits - to prevent opposition leaders and activists from traveling abroad freely. The GOB's actions indicate a trend of keeping tighter control over those associated with the opposition in the lead-up to the 2006 presidential elections. End summary.

Some Experienced Problems at the Border

¶2. On October 27, Belarusian customs officials prevented Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" (BSDP) leader Aleksandr Kozulin from boarding a plane to Frankfurt. Kozulin was traveling to Denmark and Sweden to participate in two conferences on October 28-30. The authorities searched Kozulin when he arrived at the airport but allowed him to proceed when they did not find a reason to prevent him from leaving. When Kozulin tried to board the plane, however, authorities forced him to return to the airport terminal and confiscated items from his bags including invitations to the conferences, a letter to presidential opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and general information about the BSDP. The authorities made him wait several hours while they wrote up the incident, thereby causing Kozulin to miss his flight. Kozulin commented the authorities conducted the search under the "precedent of open arbitrariness with a poorly disguised political motive." [Note: Post does not believe Kozulin has subsequently tried to leave the country. End Note.]

¶3. The same day, customs officials seized written material from United Civic Party (UCP) leader Anatoly Lebedko upon his arrival to the Minsk airport from Strasbourg, where he had met with members of the European Parliament. The authorities confiscated Lebedko's travel itineraries and information in English on the recent National Congress of Democratic Forces and biographies of presidential opposition candidates. Lebedko defended his right to have these documents, and the absurdity of their seizure, since the information was easily available on the internet and was neither secret nor subversive. He pointed out that officials from the Belarusian embassy were even at some of the meetings he attended and could have passed the information the authorities confiscated to concerned agencies in Belarus. [Note: Leader of the Belarusian Popular Front Vintsuk Vyachorka, who in the past has been repeatedly stopped and searched by authorities when crossing the border, traveled back to Belarus with Lebedko. Vyachorka, however, experienced no trouble with the authorities at customs. He added sarcastically, "I am even a bit disappointed." End Note.]

¶4. On October 31, Belarusian guards at the Polish border

detained former leader of the Union of Belarusian Poles (UBP) Anzhelika Borys for several hours before finally allowing her to pass to Poland. [Note: Anzhelika Borys was the democratically elected leader of the UBP, who was removed in GOB-managed elections. End Note.] At first, the authorities invalidated the exit travel stamp in her passport, which is a necessary requirement for travel abroad. Eventually the authorities reinstated her exit travel stamp and allowed her to continue on her way.

Some Cannot Even Get to the Border

¶5. On October 28, the Minsk City Council of Lawyers denied human rights lawyer Vera Stremkovskaya permission to travel to Tbilisi from November 2-5 for an OSCE conference on independent Bar associations. That same day, the council adopted a resolution forbidding all lawyers to travel abroad for a period of one month. Previously the council denied permission for Stremkovskaya to travel to an international conference in Korea after she spoke in Warsaw about the need for judicial system reforms and guarantees for independent Bar associations to defend human rights in Belarus.

¶6. On October 12, a Belarusian court rejected UBP activist Andrzej Poczobut's appeal of a GOB travel ban. On July 27, a Grodno court banned him from traveling abroad until he paid the remainder of his BYR 5.1 million [USD 2,380] fine. [Note: This amount is equivalent to an average annual salary. End Note.] Poczobut still owed BYR 500,000 [USD 232], but was not able to make the next payment since he was serving a short jail sentence. Since Poczobut considered the remaining amount to be negligible, he hoped the court

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would remove the travel ban. He regarded the courts decision as a "politically motivated...campaign of pressure on those UBP members who don't recognize the results of the [GOB mandated UBP] repeat sixth convention." [Comment: The GOB has vastly increased the use of large fines in recent months, and in several cases has denied pro-democracy activists the right to travel abroad for non-payment of these fines. End Comment.]

¶7. On October 4, the Belarusians Constitutional Court ruled to keep the country's foreign travel permit system in place. If Belarusian citizens wish to travel abroad, they must pay a fee of BYR 127,500 [USD 60] to receive a five-year travel permit. The court had originally recommended to annul the permit system by January 1, 2006 but later revoked its recommendation after the government protested. On October 28, the department of Passports and Visas Services denied Zubr human rights coordinator Iryna Toustsik an exit permit stamp in her passport because the Belarusian KGB wanted to ask her some questions. Toustsik linked the denial and subsequent inquiry to her opposition activities.

Comment

¶8. Freedom of movement is guaranteed by the Belarusian constitution. Although in most cases activists only face increased scrutiny and more thorough checks at the border, in recent months the GOB has increasingly interfered with the ability of pro-democracy activists to travel abroad, and in many cases even within the country. The GOB's recent actions indicate a new and alarming trend to exert more control over the opposition in the lead up to next year's presidential elections.

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